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ABSTRACT

In dealing with a small college theater production program the first thing to consider is the aim and purpose of the program and how this fits in with the goals and mission of the department and the college. The main goal of the program should be the education of students--both those involved in the production, and those who will see performances--and this education should be part of the overall liberal arts experience, while also providing an education in the practical work of staging a production. Theater professionals have the responsibility of convincing colleagues and administrators of the validity and educational value of the production experience by providing information, granting academic credit for production work, and making others aware of the teaching involved in many stages of every production. A small theater department requires staff with skills balanced between the classroom and the stage, and workloads balanced between teaching and production. Administrators should be kept informed of rising show expenses, and departments should do finished productions, whether expensive or cheap. Selection of plays for a season must consider many factors. Wise and thoughtful play selection can enhance the educational respect of the department, build an audience, attract students to participate, and accomplish the major goal of education through production. (Suggested sources for program assistance are attached.) (SR)

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Managing a Responsive and Responsible Theatre Production Program in a Small College

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MANAGING A RESPONSIVE AND RESPONSIBLE THEATRE PRODUCTION PROGRAM IN A SMALL COLLEGE

Most small college administrations want a theatre production program as part of their Fine Arts offerings. Like music concerts and art showings, theatre productions provide visability for the college and its programs in the arts. However, most of those outside the theatre, including some of our colleagues in the other arts, do not seem to realize what is involved in managing a responsive and responsible theatre production program. We in the small college theatre know what is involved and continually seek to make our programs responsible and responsive--to students, colleagues, administrators, and the college.

The purpose of this paper is to help us look at our programs, evaluate their responsiveness, and find ways to help those outside the theatre understand what we do. I will first look at the aims and purposes of a theatre production program and where it fits into the academic scheme of things. This should not only help in evaluating our programs but provide ways of selling our programs to others. I will then provide some specifics regarding staffing, budgets, and season selection. Finally, I will conclude with a brief list of resources which might prove helpful.

Aims and Purposes of a Production Program

In dealing with a small college theatre production program the first thing to consider is the aim and purpose of the program and how this fits in with the goals and mission of the department and the college. The ideal role of a production program is the education of the students--both those directly involved in the production, on stage and behind the scenes, and those who will see the performances. This is and should be the main goal of the program. A production program is not and should not be set up mainly for the entertainment of those on campus and the local community. If entertainment is a successful by-product that is fine; however, this is not the chief aim of the program.

The education provided by a production program should be two-fold. It should be a part of the overall liberal arts experience while at the same time providing an education in the practical work related to the staging of a production.

The Liberal Arts Experience

Most small colleges stress the liberal arts experience and a theatre production program must be organized and seen as a part of this experience--thus the emphasis on education. In our production of plays, we must help our students (as well as our audiences) see that these works are not just pieces of theatre but are reflections of the world and society around them, past and present. In this way we can help them relate these works to other areas of study in which they are involved. We need to help them become aware of theatre as one more way of looking at the human condition which can supplement their liberal arts experience.

Unfortunately, students are too often required to read and analyze plays merely as works of dramatic literature. While there is certainly a validity in this, we in the theatre must be aware and make students and colleagues aware that this is not enough. Plays were written to be performed and only through production can we get the full sense of the work as it was intended by its author. It is therefore necessary to develop the production program partially as an extension of the literary analysis that is so often done in some drama classes and in other departments, particularly English.

The Production Experience

In addition to being an extension or fulfillment of literary analysis, a production program must also serve the educational needs of the students in terms of the actual production process. The production of a play is an extension of the theatre classroom learning experience where theories and ideas can be put to the acid test. It is a laboratory experience as educationally valid as any chemistry or biology laboratory experience. It teaches the students by doing and, in the presence of an audience, the response or grading is immediate. What could be more educationally sound or valid that this? As in chemistry or biology experiments the theatre production experiment sometimes fails and we achieve less that the desired perfection. But is perfection the goal? No, it is the learning experience that is the goal. Through the performance of a play students learn about the play, about themselves, about each other, and about the world around them. This is not meant to excuse bad performances since we should always strive for the most professional

production of which we are capable; however, it does place the emphasis where it should be--on the educational experience and not on the final result. Can we not learn from failure as well as success?

Educational Validity of Productions

With any production program the question of the educational validity of "hands-on" experience seems to come into question. Here we, as theatre professionals, have the responsibility of convincing colleagues and particularly administrators of the value of this learning experience. Too often productions are considered as extra-curricular activities with little or no connection to the academic program--they are something theatre students and faculty do in their spare time. If we can convince others that this experience is a co-curricular activity, an extension of the liberal arts and classroom experience, then we can perhaps enhance its educational validity in the eyes of those who tend to see it as simply playtime.

Creating an Awareness of Your Program

I do not think I am saying anything new here or anything with which you would not readily agree. We in the theatre are aware of these things. However, I believe part of our responsibility in managing a small theatre production program is to make others aware of these things, especially our administrators. All too often we gripe about how we, as theatre people, are misunderstood and under-appreciated and how our program is misunderstood and not valued as it should be. But in many cases I believe that this is our own fault. When was the last time you tried to convince your administrators of the validity of your production program and point out to them the educational value of it?

Providing information From recent experiences I have become much more aware that administrators and colleagues are not intentionally misunderstanding us--they just have no real conception of what is involved in staging a production. Thus, one way of making people aware of what we do is simply to provide information. For example, our Fine Arts Commitee recently brought the Nancy Hauser Dance Company to Ripon for a single performance. It was scheduled on the only date they were available which happened to fall just four day after we had closed our production of The Fantasticks. The Committee did not see any real problem with this

scheduling despite my warnings and the fact that it involved changing the theatre over from a thrust format to a proscenium setting, redoing all the seating, laying down the dance floor, and changing over all the lighting. Following this performance I submitted a report to the Fine Arts Committee and the Dean in which I detailed all the time involved in staging this one performance of the dance company. The final tally showed that in three days, 209 student hours and 40 faculty hours had been involved. After reading the report, even two of my colleagues from the Fine Arts who serve on the Committee were astounded.

Those outside the theatre are amazed when you inform them of the number of hours it takes to hang and focus lights and set all the cues, and the fact that not just anyone off the street can do this. They do not seem to realize that rehearsals five or six nights a week plus building and painting scenery, gathering props, sewing costumes, writing press releases, organizing the box office, and the host of other details that go into a production are not a part of your contract and are done in addition to your regular classwork, committee meetings, research, and whatever. We have a responsibility to make people aware of this and the fact that all of this involves teaching and learning. You can teach lighting theory until doomsday, but until the students have had to hang and focus a light plot they do not really grasp what it is all about. And when the curtain goes up on opening night and the audience applaudes they have passed their final examination.

Granting credit. Perhaps another way in which we can increase the awareness of the educational value of our production programs is to offer academic credit for production work. This may increase the respect for and validity of this work in the eyes of those outside the theatre. Students receive credit for laboratory work in other disciplines, so why not for laboratory work in the theatre? However, we must be sure that the requirements for credit are serious ones and that students do accomplish the tasks assigned before credit is granted. Unless production work is offered for credit, faculty members will not have their time and teaching reflected in their course load. Even if this puts them in an overload situation, at least it reflects and recognizes what they are actually teaching. In addition, credit for production work may provide an incentive for the nontheatre student to become involved and these students often turn out to be of great assistance and value, particularly in a small department where we could not exist without this kind of outside

input.

Emphasizing teaching We need to let people know that there is teaching involved with production. As faculty of a small theatre department we are charged with the responsibility of covering all the bases (acting, directing, literature, technical theatre) with limited staff. One way of accomplishing this is through the production program. For example, staff restrictions may not permit a formal acting class to be offered but acting can and certainly should be taught in the rehearsals for a production. House management and box office procedure courses are a luxury in a small program but what better way to teach these things than to have the students actually do it for a production. Again, these are things we in the theatre may be well aware of; however, there is the need and responsibility to make others aware of this kind of education which goes on with every production.

If we, as theatre faculty, can make others aware of the time and teaching that goes into a production then perhaps we can help them come to grips with what seem to be continual questions concerning our status within the academic community. Questions such as: How to evaluate creative artists for promotion and tenure? Is creative work the same thing as scholarship? What is the appropriate terminal degree for a theatre artist? Should we receive release time for directing or designing? I know how I would answer each of these. I have yet to convince my administration of the correctness of all my answers though I will continue to try, and progress is being made. I am sure each of you can also answer each of these and I believe that you have a responsibility to attempt to convince your administration of the correctness of your responses. Only in this way can we in small theatre departments receive the respect and confirmation of the validity of our educational mission within the liberal arts that we deserve and have the right to expect from administrators and colleagues.

Some Practical Considerations

On a more practical level I would like to address the matters of staffing, budgets, and season selection in a small department.

Staffing In a small department we will never have all the staff we would like or need and yet, as I mentioned earlier, we are expected to

cover all the bases. To acccomplish this we must look carefully at the capabilities of those currently on our staffs and those that we hire. Are they narrow specialists or do they have the ability to handle a range of courses and production needs? Obviously we need the latter.

Most people outside the department recognize the need for those who teach the standard "academic" courses, but do they recognize the need for those who teach on the stage during production? Unfortunately, many do not. Thus we need to open their eyes to the need for those teachers skilled in the technical areas who can teach the students, through practical experience, how to fulfill the visual needs of a production. We need those who can teach but also who can do. We need a balance within a small department between the classroom and the stage whether that be with one person or with two or three. Thus we have the responsibility of helping those who hire to recognize this need for balance and hire accordingly.

We also have the responsibility for utilizing those we have as meaningfully as possible without burning them out. We need to set a realistic season which will permit us to teach through production but also permit adequate time for classroom work and our own research. We should not be expected to produce four, five, or six productions simply because someone up there thinks that this would be a nice season. We need to maintain a balance between the classroom and the production experiences which will, hopefully, help keep our faculty vibrant and vital.

Many small colleges may bring in outside arts groups to supplement the cultural offerings of the institution. While this is a healthy and beneficial thing, theatre faculty should not be expected to shoulder the total burden of meeting the technical and other needs of these artists. Here again, making those who book these groups knowledgeable of the demands this places on theatre faculty, students, and facilities is necessary since hosting these groups requires time and effort beyond our contractual agreements. Perhaps rather than being totally at the mercy of the technical riders from outside groups, we can draw up our own contracts setting forth what we can and cannot reasonably provide in terms of staff, time, and materials. In addition we should also be aware of those on campus who can assist us in our duties--such as the Physical Plant personnel, the Business Office, the Public Relations Office, the English Department, the Art Department. Cultivate these folks and you

will find the rewards well worth it.

Budget. In terms of budgets we may have to come to grips with the question of whether we do "cheap and many" or "expensive and few." This needs to be answered by each department but, regardless of the choice, we need to do finished productions and cannot limit ourselves to a constant stream of "modern dress-no set" shows. Our administrators in charge of finances are well aware of rising costs but seem, at times, to forget that this affects the theatre as well. Show them year to year cost increases, inform them that a gallon of scenic paint costs $30, point out the fact that lighting instrument lamps run to $20 or more each, or that a sheet of plywood is over $25. If we will share our per show expenses with those who appropriate the funds, perhaps we can help them understand the costs of doing productions and doing them properly. They need to acknowledge that, like everyone else, we need to keep pace with the rising costs of materials.

While this may or may not get your budget increased, the bottom line concerning budgets is that, regardless of their size, we must not let the budget totally dictate our choice of productions and how we stage them. In addition we, as creative artists, must keep in mind that often times creativity can become more apparent under adverse conditions and constraints.

Season selection. In selecting our seasons we have the responsibility of maintaining an educational standard. Fortunately, most of us do not have to live off our box office and this allows us a greater latitude in script selection. We are not tied to popular successes and musicals. We must use this latitude wisely and select works which will help both those involved in the production and our audiences to grow and learn. This does not imply that we do only Shakespeare or the Greeks or O'Neill but that we choose scripts which are not the common fare of area dinner theatres and done mainly because they will attract a large paying audience. Because of this latitude we have the responsibility of doing great pieces of dramatic literature which others cannot afford to do simply because they are risky at the box office. We also have the responsibility to give a hearing to new scripts which those who need to live from box office receipts are hesitant to attempt.

Furthermore, in our script selection we can enhance the work of

other departments by coordinating our study of a play on a particular subject with their study of that subject, or by doing a play of a period being covered in a history or foreign language class or a play being analyzed in an English class.

The choosing of a season cannot be taken lightly when we consider all the demands placed on our choice. We must choose plays we want to direct, plays from which students will learn but which they can reasonably accomplish, plays which are suited to our audiences and our educational goals, plays which we can afford to do, and plays which deserve production without concern for their success or failure at the box office. Wise and thoughtful play selection can enhance the educational respect of our department, build an audience, attract students to participate, and accomplish our major goal of education through production.

And Finally. . .

Through theatre we create a world of magic; however, this magic is accomplished only through hard work and education. In managing a responsive and responsible theatre production program in a small college we need not give away all our secrets, but we do need to make students, colleagues, and administrators aware of the educational value of our productions and their place in the liberal arts curriculum.

Suggested Sources for Program Assistance

Association for Theatre in Higher Education--Programs of Limited Size
Duncan Smith, Chair ATHE-TPLS
Department of English and Theatre Arts
Hartwick College
Oneonta, NY 13820

Mark A. Heckler, ATHE-TPLS Vice Chair for Conferences
Department of Fine Arts Theatre
Siena College
Loudonville, NY 12211

Central States--SCA Small College Committee
Jim De Young, Monmouth College, Monmouth, Illinois
Rufus Cadigan, Rockford College, Rockford, Illinois

Southern States--SCA Small College Committee
Joyce Webb, Shepherd College, Shepherdstown, West Virginia
John Urquhart, Cumberland College, Williamsburg, Kentucky

Western States--SCA Small College Committee
Shirlee Hennigan, Lewis-Clark State College, Lewiston, Idaho